

Local and National Responses to “The Clansman,” 1905-1907

THE CAIRO BULLETIN, FRIDAY MORNING, JANUARY 18, 1907.

CAIRO OPERA HOUSE---D. L. WILLIAMSON, Manager.
ONE NIGHT ONLY---MONDAY, JANUARY, 21
Second Triumphant Season of the Greatest Success in the History of the Theatrical World.

George H. Brennan, Presents

THE CLANSMAN

By Thomas Dixon, Jr.

From His Two Famous Novels, “THE LEOPARD’S SPOTS” and “THE CLANSMAN.”

“THE MOST TALKED OF PLAY OF THE PAST FIFTY YEARS.” A Specially Selected Company of Forty Principals. A Small Army of Supernumeraries. Carloads of Scenery, Mechanical and Lighting Effects, and a Troop of Cavalry Horses. Five Distinct and Successful Engagements in New York City last season. An All-Summer Run in Chicago, and Record-Breaking Visits to Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, Pittsburg, St. Louis, New Orleans, Kansas City and Louisville.

SEAT SALE SATURDAY. PRICES---Entire lower floor \$1.50, First four rows dress circle \$1, Balance dress circle 75c, Gallery 50c.

IMPORTANT WARNING---Avoid Speculators. On account of the enormous demand for seats and the fact that many theatre-goers were compelled to pay excessive prices to speculators for choice locations for “THE CLANSMAN” engagement last season, the management has decided, in order to protect patrons, to receive mail orders if accompanied by remittances. Not more than ten seats will be sold to any purchaser.

Advertisement for the production of “The Clansman,” 1907

Introduction:

Examine the advertisement at the top of this page. What do you notice? What might it mean? Why?

This advertisement for a play was part of the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a domestic terrorist organization in the United States. In the years leading up to this revival, the public had been exposed to a steady stream of half-truths and distorted narratives about the original Klan, laying the groundwork for its return in the 1920s. Many of these portrayals of the KKK, including plays adapted from Thomas Dixon’s book, “The Clansman,” manipulated the public’s fears—particularly fears of racial dominance, threats to society, and the menace of terrorism—to bolster support for its revival. By 1907, “The Clansman” had already played to sold-out performances across the United States and was set to open in Cairo, Illinois.

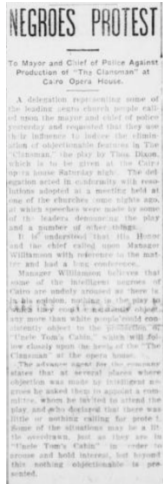
Essential Questions:

- How was “The Clansman” received in Cairo, IL?
- How did this response compare to the play’s reception across the nation?
- What did reactions to these protests reveal about attitudes toward issues of race and free speech during the early 1900s?

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Your Task:

First, read *The Cairo Bulletin* newspaper report to determine how the African American community in southern Illinois responded to the play’s opening in their town.



***The Cairo Bulletin*, January 18, 1907 (Cairo, IL)**

Negros Protest to Mayor and Chief of Police Against Production of “The Clansman” at Cairo Opera House

A delegation representing some of the leading negro church people called upon the mayor and chief of police yesterday and requested that they use their influence to induce the elimination of objectionable features in “The Clansman,” the play by Thos. Dixon, which is to be given at the Cairo opera house Saturday night. The delegation acted in conformity with resolutions adopted at a meeting held at one of the churches some nights ago, at which speeches were made by some of the leaders denouncing the play and a number of other things.

It is understood that His Honor and the chief called upon Manager Williamson with reference to the matter and had a long conference.

Manager Williamson believes that some of the intelligent negroes of Cairo are unduly aroused as there is in his opinion, nothing in the play to which they could consistently object, any more than white people could consistently object to the production of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” which will follow closely upon the heels of “The Clansman” at the opera house.

The advance agent for the company states that at several places where objection was made by intelligent negroes he asked them to appoint a committee, whom he invited to attend the play and, who declared that there was little or nothing calling for protest. Some of the situations may be a little overdrawn, just as they are in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in order to arouse and hold interest, but beyond this nothing objectionable is presented.

Next, analyze the following newspaper articles written by both white and African American journalists—including Thomas Dixon’s defense (*The Watchman & Southern*, 1905b)—to determine how well the two plays adapted from Thomas Dixon’s book, “The Clansman,” were received across the nation and compare these responses to those made in southern Illinois. Keep in mind the following questions: Which sources approved of the play’s content? Why? Which did not? Why?

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Southern Christian Advocate, October 26, 1905

(Charleston, SC)

We have no need, therefore, of such representations as the Clansman. We know already (alas!) what Reconstruction meant and means for us. Thinking men, North and South, are virtually agreed as to its essential features and the whole wretched wrong of it. The problem before us is not to restore to memory the terror of its experiences, but to work out bravely, kindly, and justly the tasks which it left to us. Our former slaves are among us, and will remain, the most of them, as an integral part of our social and industrial system. They are a backward, primitive, undeveloped race yet to be shaped for useful service. This is our task, and the task cannot be performed by bitterness or passion or hate. Justice, the common instincts of humanity and Christian charity, must govern all our methods and control thought or feeling! If we do not, we are entering all our moods. God help us to put aside every other upon the darkest, saddest page in our history. Let us keep cool and sane while the Clansman is scattering its lurid, loud sensationalism up and down the land.

The author is (circle one) for or against the play because... (complete this sentence)

What evidence from the source supports your claim? (underline or write below)

The News & Observer, October 15, 1905a

(Raleigh, NC)

"The Clansman" Disapproved.
Roanoke News.

We do not believe that the "Clansman" can do any good in the South. It has a tendency to stir the old fires of hatred and prejudice. The Ku Klux Klan was, perhaps, a necessity forty years ago, but not in these days of peace, when we are a united people, when the North and the South have clasped hand over the bloody chasm, and have cemented the compact by a baptism of fire and blood on the Winslow at Cardenas, at Santiago and San Juan heights, and in thousands of other ways in which men who formerly wore the gray and those who wore the blue have shown to the world that they are, indeed, brothers.

The author is (circle one) for or against the play because... (complete this sentence)

What evidence from the source supports your claim? (underline or write below)

The News & Observer, October 15, 1905b

(Raleigh, NC)

Will Do Good and Not Harm.
Burlington News.

We had the pleasure of seeing the "Clansman" played at Greensboro last week. We went with a little misgiving, fearing that the play would be calculated to stir up animosity between the North and South. We came away believing that the play will do good if presented before a Northern audience. * * * * * We believe the play will do good and not harm.

The author is (circle one) for or against the play because... (complete this sentence)

What evidence from the source supports your claim? (underline or write below)

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The Watchman & Southern, October 25, 1905a

Tom Dixon rested his play on that defense. We challenged the historic correctness of his assertions. We proved his misstatements so completely that he has not touched upon these points. We showed by history that the Ku Klux Klan, as an organization, was extinct before the election of Moses as governor; before the election of a negro lieutenant governor. We asserted that the 80,000 armed negroes were about 10,000 armed negroes. Tom Dixon has not attempted to meet this clear question of fact. He has not attempted to explain what is really the most horrible insult ever offered the southern people—the declaration that any power of earth or hell could reduce them to a state of "negroid mongrelism," and the assertion that but for the Ku Klux Klan—absolutely unknown in many sections—the south would have become mulatto." He was silent on those points,

(Sumter, SC)

The author is (circle one) for or against the play because... (complete this sentence)

What evidence from the source supports your claim? (underline or write below)

The Watchman & Southern, October 25, 1905b

I will submit that issue to the Columbia Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy, to a jury of 12 mothers among them, who witnessed the play. If these good Southern women decide that my play is indecent or harmful to their daughters or their sons, I will withdraw it from the boards, if you will agree to withdraw as an editor of public opinion in case they decide against you.

Now, Mr. Editor, it is up to you. You have raised the issue—I challenge you to face it.

(Sumter, SC)

The author is (circle one) for or against the play because... (complete this sentence)

What evidence from the source supports your claim? (underline or write below)

Local and National Responses to "The Clansman," 1905-1907

The Broad Ax, November 10, 1906

(Chicago, IL)

A CALL TO ACTION.
Philadelphia, Oct. 20, 1906.
We, the Colored citizens of the City of Philadelphia, do unanimously and most positively protest against the exhibition of "The Clansman" in this city in the Walnut Street Theatre as announced for next week commencing Monday evening, the 22d inst. No agency has done more to arouse a spirit of antipathy against the Negro and to bring about a war of races than this play. Lynchings have been encouraged by the play and because of its dangerous influence it has been driven out of a number of cities in the South and also in the West.
We, the citizens, have determined that it shall not play in the Walnut Street Theatre during the coming week without making an effectual protest.
All citizen are called upon to appear at the doors of the theatre on Monday night to make an effectual protest.

The author is (circle one) for or against the play because... (complete this sentence)

What evidence from the source supports your claim? (underline or write below)

Revisiting the Essential Questions:

How was "The Clansman" received in Cairo, IL?

How did this response compare to the play's reception across the nation?

What did reactions to these protests reveal about attitudes toward issues of race and free speech during the early 1900s?
